

OBSTETRIC SERVICES THREATENED, SOCIETIES WARN

Two medical societies are concerned about the effect government cut-backs and increasing malpractice-insurance fees are having on the delivery of obstetric services in Canada. In a news release, the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada and the Association of Professors of Obstetrics and Gynaecology said the cost of insurance fees is reaching a point where the costs of providing obstetric services will become economically unfeasible for doctors.

If obstetricians leave their practices and medical students choose other fields, education and research programs will also be jeopardized, to the detriment of health care that is available for women. The societies urged ministers of health to explore the issue and examine possible solutions, such as provincial jurisdiction over physicians' insurance fees.

PHYSICIAN SUPPLY DEBATED IN US

Medical schools in the US would shrink by 20% and it would be harder for international medical graduates (IMGs) to get visas for residencies or jobs if a 21-member bipartisan commission sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts has its way. *AM News* reported recently that the Pew commission believes the US is moving from a physician-patient

ratio of 237 per 100 000 in 1990 to a projected 291 per 100 000 in 2020, far more doctors than are needed in a managed-care environment. The commission predicts a surplus of as many as 150 000 physicians, closure of as many as half of the nation's hospitals and consolidation of many of more than 200 allied health professions into "multiskilled" professions.

The panel concluded that closing medical schools was preferable to cutting enrolments across the board, that the number of residency slots should be restricted to 110% of US graduates, and that visas for IMGs who want to stay in the US after their residencies should be restricted. Other recommendations were to steer at least 50% of physicians into primary care residencies by the year 2000, and close enough schools to cut first-year slots from 17 000 to 14 000 by 2025. *AM News* said that even though many medical educators acknowledge that an oversupply of physicians is on the horizon, they believe the commission's recommendations "are overblown and unrealistic, failing to account for the economic devastation that large-scale medical school closings could cause."

AUTOPSIES NOT A DYING BUSINESS FOR US ENTREPRENEUR

Autopsy may be a dying medical art, but a long-time investigator for the Los Angeles County Coroner's Office thinks he can resurrect the procedure for profit in the US. *Newsweek*

reported recently that Vidal Herrera plans to open franchises of his fledgling autopsy business, Autopsy/Post Services, in the next 2 years. His clients are hospitals, many of which no longer provide complete autopsy facilities, and private clients, usually family members either suspicious of malpractice or seeking information on hereditary diseases.

In the US as in Canada (see *Can Med Assoc J* 1995; 153: 811-814), autopsies are becoming less common. *Newsweek* says only 5% to 10% of corpses are now dissected and examined in the US. Enter the entrepreneur. Herrera, who employs 4 staff members and has 9 physicians on call, says his firm performed 700 autopsies last year at a cost of \$250 to \$2000 or more, and he turned down 11 000 others. *Newsweek* says he is a shameless promoter of his trade, with vanity plates (YSPOTUA) that are designed to spell out a message in rear-view mirrors. His phone number (1-800-AUTOPSY) is painted on his three company vans, and he plans to sponsor a team, the Stiffs, in the L.A. Marathon. "Death is in," says Herrera, who claims that aging baby boomers mean that he has found his own "recession-proof business."

GOVERNMENT STUDIES DENTAL AMALGAM

Health Canada is developing a departmental position on the safety of mercury found in dental amalgam. The fall 1995 *Medical Devices Bulletin* reported that a government review of

available data on dental amalgam, including an exposure and risk assessment, had undergone scientific peer review and data are expected to be released this fall.

The safety of dental amalgam has been the subject of several controversial media reports, and research has linked dental mercury with a wide range of illnesses. Although both Sweden and Germany have proposed restrictions or gradual discontinuation of the use of dental amalgam, the US Public Health Service concluded in 1993 that such recommendations are inappropriate.

CALLING ALL CURLERS

The Saskatchewan Medical Association (SMA) is inviting physicians from across Canada to participate in the 1996 Canadian Medical Curling Bonspiel, which will be held at the Saskatoon Hub City Curling Club from Mar. 13-16. Dr. Briane Scharfstein, executive director of the SMA, says the tournament has generally attracted teams from the Western provinces, particularly Alberta and Saskatchewan, "but we would very much like to host curlers from all provinces — we look forward to hosting our colleagues from across Canada." Information is available from Scharfstein, #200 – 211 Fourth Ave. South, Saskatoon, SK S7K 1N1, 306 244-2196.

MEDICAL LEGISLATION TABLED IN NS

The Provincial Medical Board will be replaced by a College of Physicians and Surgeons and peer review will be mandatory under the terms of Nova Scotia's new Medical Act. The legislation grants the new college a renewed and expanded mandate to li-

cense and discipline physicians, establish standards of knowledge, skill, ethics and qualifications, and address complaints in a simple, modernized fashion. Dr. Ron Stewart, the health minister, called the act a "progressive piece of legislation to help physicians provide safe care, quality care and appropriate care."

Two other pieces of legislation recently were tabled by the NS government: a revised Medical Society Act, which updates the original act created in the 1860s, and a bill that will permit NS physicians to incorporate. All three acts were welcomed by the president of the Medical Society of Nova Scotia, Dr. LeRoy Hefernan, who said the changes are very positive for the medical profession and Nova Scotians.

NO AGREEMENT ON AMA RESTRUCTURING PLANS

Leaders of the American Medical Association (AMA) have welcomed the notion that the AMA must change to maintain its relevance with US physicians, but at a recent meeting they failed to adopt any concrete proposals on how to go about it. *AM News* reported recently that delegates considered a wide range of proposals aimed at making the AMA more representative of the physician population and at giving specialty societies and other groups more of a voice in decision making.

Turf fights surfaced quickly, *AM News* said, "and a host of recommendation that would have set new ground rules for representation were referred for further study or vigorously rejected." State-led amendments took much of the meat out of the proposals, leaving a report that one disappointed delegate said "calls for change but has status quo written all over it." The committee looking at restructuring will try to assemble

new proposals for the annual meeting in June.

MCGILL PUTTING CURRICULUM ONLINE

McGill University's Faculty of Medicine will be the first medical school in Canada to put its first- and second-year curriculum online. Thanks to a \$3.75 million gift from the Molson Foundation, the school will use an emerging discipline known as medical informatics to improve medical education, research and patient care. A multifaculty group headed by Dr. David Fleiszer, McGill's assistant dean of medical informatics, will determine the best way to use computers in teaching and learning. The multimedia approach is expected to provide students with realistic scenarios and simulated clinical situations.

MARCH IS ROSACEA AWARENESS MONTH

Rosacea can cause permanent facial damage if left untreated, but 70% of people with the condition may never be diagnosed or treated properly, according to a survey undertaken by Galderma Canada, a Toronto-based pharmaceutical firm. Rosacea, a chronic disease that affects about 7% of Canadians, is linked to the vascular network of the facial skin and is usually triggered by factors that cause flushing and blushing. As part of an awareness program, which includes designating March as Rosacea Awareness Month, Galderma is offering free information pamphlets. Copies of the pamphlet "Unmasking Rosacea" are available from 430 Ste. Helene, Suite 301, Montreal, QC H2Y 2K7.